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PROSPECTS FOR THE TWO-STATE SOLUTION IN THE MIDDLE EAST: HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND NEW REALITIES

Abstract

The terrorist attacks against Israel on October 7, 2023, triggered one of the largest conflicts in the Middle East, which seemingly further compromised the grim chances for peace in this region. However, in the post-conflict environment, new chances and opportunities may emerge to restart the peace process. This paper discusses the historical context of the birth and evolution of the “two-state solution” principle in the Middle East. This principle has been the basis for the peace process and conflict resolution in the Middle East for decades and has aided several significant achievements. However, during the last two decades, two major impeding factors have appeared, and they have significantly slowed down the peace process, if not made peace unachievable in the foreseeable future. One of these two major impeding factors is the militant and terrorist organization Hamas, being in power in the Palestinian Gaza Strip since 2007. The second is the far-right, conservative government in Israel led by the longest-serving Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, which outright rejects the two-state solution. This paper ultimately discusses the possibility that the peace process may be restarted in the post-conflict period if these two impeding factors are eliminated and other less influential factors are addressed. If these conditions are met, the two-state solution can become possible, given the overwhelming interest and efforts of the international community.

Keywords: Palestine, Gaza Strip, Israel, Hamas, Fatah.

Introduction

On October 7, 2023, the world was shocked by the heinous terrorist attack against Israel perpetrated by a Palestinian militant organization, Hamas. This was the largest terrorist act in Israel in decades. Hamas massacred 1,200 Israeli civilians in the most brutal way, wounded many more, and took 240 civilian hostages. Hamas’s terrorist act against Israel triggered one of the most disastrous conflicts in recent Middle Eastern history (Frankel 2024). Israel’s response to the terrorist act was overwhelming, which caused an extremely high number of Palestinian civilian casualties in the Gaza Strip, where Hamas has held power for many years. The Israeli military response resulted in significant international pressure on Israel, including from its partners, criticizing the tactics of the military operation that inflicted an enormous number of civilian casualties.

Following the October 7 terrorist acts, Israel made the firm decision to destroy Hamas and eliminate its presence in Gaza, where the militant group has been in control since 2007. Israel’s Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, considers the destruction of Hamas as a major precondition to pave the way to peace in the Middle East (Fortinsky 2023).

The elimination of Hamas is indeed one of the main factors for promoting peace in the region. However, Netanyahu fails to admit the other impediments to Middle Eastern peace, such as the Israeli practice of building settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories. Netanyahu, who is the longest-serving Prime Minister in Israel’s history, sees the Middle East peace differently from the views of most of the international community, including Israel’s major strategic partner – the United States. For Netanyahu, peace in the Middle East can be achieved through deradicalization and demilitarization of the Palestinian territories, without any sovereignty for the state of Palestine. However, the world sees the

prospect for lasting peace in the Middle East only through the so-called “two-state solution”, where two sovereign nations – Israel and Palestine – live peacefully side by side.

The Two-State Solution

The principle of the two-state solution takes root from the decision made by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1947. Namely, at the request of the United Kingdom, the United Nations General Assembly adopted resolution № 181, which terminated the British mandate and partitioned the territory of Palestine into two states: the Arab State (today known as Palestine) and the Jewish State. Meanwhile, the resolution internationalized the city of Jerusalem, placing the city under the special international regime to be administered by the United Nations (UNISPAL, History of the Question of Palestine). The UN partition plan was rejected by both Palestinian Arabs and neighboring Arab states, who considered the entire territory of Palestine as purely Arab land. From this moment onwards, the United Nations’ partition plan has never worked. Instead, since the plan’s inception, the Middle East has seen two major wars between Israel and Arab nations (in 1948-1949 and 1967), along with other wars of lower intensity, which put the prospects for peace under serious question.

In these two wars, there was a confrontation between Israel and all Arab nations in the neighborhood – Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq. In the 1948-1949 war, which directly followed Israel’s declaration of Independence, Israel managed to strengthen control over the territories that were allocated to it by the UN resolution and even grabbed some parts of the territories allocated to the Arab State. As a result of this war, the major parts of the territories of the Arab State were incorporated by Jordan and Egypt (West Bank and Gaza Strip, respectively). Another major Arab-Israeli war, in 1967, left Israel with occupation of the entire territory of Palestine, including the West Bank and Gaza. Furthermore, Israel managed to occupy the Golan Heights of Syria and the Sinai Peninsula of Egypt.

Despite such developments, the idea of the two-state solution did not disappear from the agenda of the international community. After the second major war of 1967, the principles of the two-state solution first appeared in the Camp David Accords, concluded between Israel and Egypt by the mediation of the United States in 1978. The accords included two framework agreements. One agreement implied Israel’s withdrawal from Egypt’s Sinai Peninsula, occupied during the 1967 war. Whereas the second agreement set the framework for negotiations between Israel, Egypt, Jordan, and Palestine on modalities to establish self-governing authority in the West Bank and Gaza during the transitional period, with an eye to negotiate the final status of these territories at a later stage (The Camp David Accords 1978).

The accords laid the foundation for peace between Israel and Egypt, followed by the comprehensive peace treaty between Egypt and Israel in 1979 (Treaty of Peace Between the Arab Republic of Egypt and the State of Israel 1979). However, the accords failed to resolve the Palestinian issue since Arab countries rejected Egypt’s unilateral endeavor to the extent that they expelled Egypt from the League of Arab States for the next ten years (Telhami 2001, 32).

The principles of the two-state solution, as were outlined in the Camp David Accords, later appeared in the Oslo Accords, which, under U.S. mediation, was concluded between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO)¹ in two phases (1993 and 1995).

The Oslo Agreements can be considered a breakthrough in the Middle East peace process since, for the first time, they established a democratically elected Palestinian self-government interim authority (mostly referred to as Palestinian Authority or PA) on the Palestinian territories of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Oslo Agreements also paved the way for status negotiations for the permanent settlement of the conflict. With the Oslo Accords, for the first time, PLO and Israel recognized each other’s political rights and agreed to achieve a lasting and comprehensive peace settlement and a historic reconciliation (Oslo I 1993; Oslo II 1995). Ultimately, these agreements failed to achieve the intended outcome of a lasting and comprehensive peace settlement due to significant opposition from radical groups on both Israeli and Palestinian sides. However, the Oslo Agreements established clear principles for the two-state solution, which still represent the basis for any future efforts in this regard.

¹ Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) is a coalition of Palestinian nationalist organizations. PLO was founded in 1964, and its main goal was to liberate the entire territory of Palestine through armed resistance. However, since 1993, PLO has sought a two-state solution through negotiations with Israel, and now it is recognized as representative of the people of Palestine.

The exact phrase of the “two-state solution” started to appear in the UN documents after the presentation of the “roadmap to two-state solution” by the Middle East Quartet in 2003 (UNISPAL, Quartet Roadmap 2003)².

The two-state solution has immense international support, with an absolute majority of the UN member states being strictly for the cause of the establishment of sovereign Palestine alongside Israel. While the international community has been active in addressing Middle East conflict since the first Arab-Israeli war of 1948-1949, the UN General Assembly resolution that directly demands the inalienable Palestinian right to self-determination, national independence, and sovereignty first appeared in 1974 (UNISPAL, Official Records of the UNGA Plenary Meeting of November 22, 1974, 4). Since then, “the question of Palestine” has been included in the agenda of the UN General Assembly, and, every year, the Assembly adopts numerous resolutions on Palestine, with overwhelming support from the UN member states. All these resolutions unequivocally support the principles of the two-state solution.

Major Impeding Factors for the Two-State Solution

We can identify two major impeding factors for the two-state solution. The first factor is an Islamist terrorist organization, Hamas, which holds power in Palestine’s Gaza Strip. The second impeding factor is the far-right conservative government of Israel, which rejects the two-state solution as the prospect for peace in the Middle East and keeps building illegal Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories despite significant international pressure.

1. Hamas

According to the Oslo Accords, the Palestinian Authority (PA) covers two territories, the West Bank and Gaza Strip, which are not connected by land. Since the establishment of the PA in 1993, both territories have been ruled by “Fatah”, a dominant political party of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), under the leadership of Yasser Arafat. Fatah is a secular Palestinian political group that recognizes Israel’s existence and rejects armed violence to achieve its objective of establishing the Palestinian state within the pre-1967 war boundaries. However, since coming to power, PA has been challenged by the Islamist movement, Hamas, which never accepted Oslo agreements and has sought to “liberate” Palestine from Israel through armed resistance (Al-Tahhan 2017). While always controversial, the majority of the international community never considered Hamas as a classical terrorist group, such as Al-Qaida. Hamas even enjoyed open support from some countries, such as Qatar and Türkiye throughout the years. Hamas is designated as a terrorist organization only by a few states, while some others designate only Hamas’s military wing.

Since the establishment of the Palestinian Authority, Hamas has been waging terrorist acts in Israel and Palestinian territories. Fatah and Hamas had several armed clashes between each other as well. However, there were times of cooperation between the two groups, in particular during the 2000 uprising of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza (the so-called Second Intifada). The standoff between these two groups has worsened since the death of Palestine’s long-time leader and chairperson of Fatah, Yasser Arafat, in 2004. At the same time, with time passing, Fatah’s support was fading away among Palestinians due to corruption, nepotism, and other discontent of the people, while Hamas, the opposition group, was gaining support (Schanzer 2003). The turning point was the 2006 Palestinian legislative elections organized by the PA, which took place after Israel’s unilateral withdrawal of all security forces and settlements from Gaza in 2005.

Surprisingly, during the 2006 legislative elections, Hamas won with a majority of seats (74 out of 132) in the Palestinian Legislative Council (Tharoor 2023). The reality that Hamas could be in charge of the PA government was totally unacceptable for both Israel and Fatah, along with the majority of the international community. Therefore, the Palestinian territories were engulfed in chaos, with periodic clashes between Fatah and Hamas, arrests by Israel, and strict international sanctions. In March 2007, Fatah and Hamas were able to briefly form a National Unity Government, which existed only until June 2007, when Hamas took over the entire Gaza Strip by force in renewed conflict between these two

² The Quartet, consisting of the UN, USA, EU, and Russia, was established in 2002 to mediate the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

groups. Since then, Hamas has controlled the Gaza Strip, while Fatah is in charge of PA in the West Bank.

The latest war in the Middle East, following the 7th of October, 2023 terrorist acts, is one of the largest. But unlike previous big wars, this is a conflict solely between Israel and Hamas, with no involvement of any Arab nations. Today, several Arab countries recognize Israel. They support the establishment of the Palestinian state in the pre-1967 war borders but no longer have a stake in confronting Israeli militarily for the Palestinian cause. In particular, this is the case concerning Egypt and Jordan, who were major foes of Israel from the first major Arab-Israeli conflict of 1948-49 but later established diplomatic ties with Israel in 1979 and 1994, respectively.

Today, overall, five Arab Countries officially recognize and have diplomatic ties with Israel. In addition to Egypt and Jordan, in 2020, three more Arab nations – the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Morocco – established diplomatic ties with Israel by mediation of the United States (Duggal 2023). There were significant attempts at normalization of relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia as well. However, these efforts have not been successful so far. The main issue has been the precondition set by Saudi Arabia to solve the Palestinian issue, with an eye on establishing the Palestinian state (Kurtzer-Ellenbogen et al. 2023). In the wake of the latest Israeli-Hamas conflict, Saudi-Israeli diplomatic relations seem more unrealistic in the near future, at least before the new process for the two-state solution kicks off.

Hamas's positions in the Arab world are not strong. On the contrary, governing elites of the major Arab nations consider Hamas as a big threat to their national security. The major reason is the origin of Hamas, established in 1987 as an extension of the Muslim Brotherhood in Palestine (Robinson 2024). On its part, the Muslim Brotherhood is an Islamist organization that originated and has its largest presence in Egypt, though its ideology has been spread all over the Arab world. The Muslim Brotherhood has been outlawed and persecuted by some Arab governments throughout decades for being a serious competitor to the secular governing elites in these states. At various times, the Muslim Brotherhood was outlawed by Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. It is important to note that Qatar's good ties with the Muslim Brotherhood were a major reason for the well-known diplomatic standoff between Qatar and a number of Arab nations – Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates – in 2017-2021 (Trager 2017).

Whereas most Arab governments dislike Hamas, this organization is supported by Iran. Even though there is a significant ideological difference between Iran (practicing Shia Islam) and Hamas (practicing Sunni Islam), this support is mainly for geopolitical purposes. Iran primarily supports Hamas to counter Israel, which Iran considers to be its major enemy in the region. In addition, Iran's support to Hamas could also target Saudi Arabia's influence in the region, given the context of Saudi Arabia-Iran decades of rivalry (Marcus 2019).

2. Netanyahu's Far-Right Government of Israel

Another major impeding factor for the two-state solution is the far-right, conservative government of Israel, which rejects the establishment of a sovereign Palestinian state, at least in the foreseeable future. Netanyahu believes that sovereign Palestine threatens Israel's security (Salman et al. 2024).

During the last several decades, Israel's society and political class have tilted toward conservatism (Kaplan and Klein 2020). Therefore, in that period, Israel's government was dominated by conservative political parties. Since 2009, the office of the Prime Minister has been held by the longest-serving, far-right leader, Benjamin Netanyahu, except for a short period in 2021-2022. Moreover, Netanyahu's latest government, inaugurated in 2022, has been considered the most far-right coalition and government in Israel's history. In addition to Netanyahu's Likud party, the coalition consists of hardline religious nationalist political parties – Religious Zionist Party, United Torah Judaism, and Shas (Holmes 2023). In 2022, the newly elected cabinet announced plans to expand Jewish settlements further in the occupied West Bank (Williams 2022). The settlements are a major challenge for the international community, as they disrupt all international efforts for peace in the Middle East and compromise the two-state solution.

On February 18, 2024, Netanyahu unveiled his plan for the post-Hamas Gaza. He basically looks for the complete demilitarization of the strip, the closing of Gaza's southern border with Egypt, an overhaul of Gaza's civil administration, and deradicalization of the education system. For the implementation of the Plan, Israel intends to cooperate with Egypt in coordination with the United States.

However, this plan outright rejects the establishment of a sovereign Palestinian state (Greene and Gotkine 2024).

The Prospects for the Middle East Peace and Two-State Solution / The Way Forward

The objective to renew the peace process in the Middle East with the agenda of the two-state solution can only be achievable if the above-discussed two major impediments are eliminated: Hamas is removed from the government in the Gaza Strip and more moderate government substitutes Israel's current far-right conservative coalition.

In the post-conflict period, Hamas's dominance of the Gaza Strip is unrealistic. Israel will no longer let Hamas rule Gaza. Hamas will either fully disappear as an organization or be significantly weakened. There is a possibility that Netanyahu's government will be seriously challenged after the conflict as well. According to the early 2024 polls, although the majority of Israelis support Netanyahu's strategy of military operation in Gaza, the absolute majority of the population does not want to see him in power after the end of the conflict (Reuters 2024). Before the 7 October terrorist acts, for 9 months, Israel was engulfed in chaos and mass street protests due to Netanyahu's intention to overhaul the Israeli Judiciary, which meant ridding the judiciary of the power to cancel government decisions. Netanyahu was accused by his opponents in an attempt to weaken democracy and push the country to authoritarian rule (Berg 2023). According to polls, the majority of Israelis did not support Netanyahu's Judicial reform, which put his approval rating down, even before the Hamas terrorist acts (Lubell 2023).

Changing Netanyahu's government with moderate political groups does not mean the new Israeli government will automatically support the two-state solution. Opposition leaders of Israel (such as Netanyahu's most likely substitute, Benny Gantz – the leader of the National Unity Alliance) are also skeptical of lasting peace in the Middle East through the two-state solution. However, with a more moderate government in power in Israel and overwhelming international efforts, there may be chances for the resumption of the peace process in the Middle East. It is important to remember that another opposition leader, Yair Lapid (leader of Israel's centrist Yesh Atid party), who briefly served as Israel's interim Prime Minister in 2022, has expressed his support for the two-state solution. Namely, at the United Nations General Assembly high-level session in September of 2022, Lapid stated that the large majority of Israelis support the two-state solution and that he himself is one of them (The Times of Israel 2022).

It is also imperative that regular Israelis and Palestinians start to believe in the possibility of peace. The joint poll conducted in December 2022 by Israeli and Palestinian organizations under the funding of the Netherlands and Japan found a declining trend in the support of the two-state solution. According to this poll, only one-third of both Israelis and Palestinians combined support the two-state solution, which is the lowest support since the start of the Oslo process. The same poll shows that 82% of Israelis and 75% of Palestinians believe the other side will never accept the existence of their independent state (Shikaki et al. 2023). The reason behind this can be the exhaustion of both publics with the permanent tensions and periodic conflicts. The trust of societies on both sides could only return with the restart of the genuine peace process. It is hard to make any estimations after decades of conflict, though the combination of factors – elimination of the terrorist organization of Hamas, change of Netanyahu's government, and strong international efforts – may create a new opportunity for lasting peace in the Middle East through the two-state solution.

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